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UNVEILING THE LAYERS OF L.O.L. SURPRISE:
AN ANALYSIS THROUGH THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso
apresentado ao Curso de Licenciatura em
Letras da Universidade Federal da
Paraíba, como exigência parcial da
obtenção do título de Licenciada em
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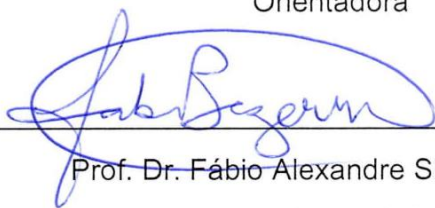
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To children.

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À Deus, Autor da vida, Criador das línguas, formas, cores e tudo que vejo. Sem o qual nada em minha vida faria sentido;

À minha família, por ser meu porto seguro e apoiar minhas escolhas;

Aos amigos que, de perto ou de longe, com conversas, orações e palavras de incentivo fizeram este percurso mais leve;

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Ao GPSM, que vai além de um grupo de pesquisa pelo carinho mútuo e apoio sem medidas proporcionado por seus membros. Orgulho é uma palavra pequena para o que sinto;

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“Seeing necessitates looking and thinking”

David Macaulay

ABSTRACT

The L.O.L. Surprise doll was created in 2016 by MGA Entertainment inspired by the YouTube trend of “unboxing” videos, in which children and adults open toys packages, or other objects, and show to the viewers how it works or what it does. Being a collectible toy with the possibility of more than a hundred surprise dolls, L.O.L. Surprise, which is a best seller, explores playing from the unwrapping of the several layers involved in the unboxing of the doll’s package. The marketing of L.O.L. Surprise does not involve TV advertisements and all its strategy is focused on YouTube videos showing kids unboxing the toy. It is possible to perceive that opening the package, and consequently finding the doll, is part of the experience/play of L.O.L. Surprise. Since the rise of the North American doll L.O.L. is a trend not only in Brazil but all around the world (FROMM, 2019), it is a rising successful trend in last years (GREEN, 2018), this study aims at describing and analyzing the multimodal features of the layers of the doll’s package, perceiving how the surprise element is constructed through it. Therefore, to analyze the layers of the package, we will draw on Kress & Van Leeuwen’s Grammar of Visual Design (2006) and its visual metafunctions, which derive from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). The description and analysis reveal a stimulus to children’s curiosity, enhanced by the interactive aspect perceived through the verbal and visual language, as well as a tendency towards consumerism and social media engagement.

Key words: Toys, multimodality, surprise, package, Grammar of Visual Design.

RESUMO

A boneca surpresa L.O.L. Surprise foi criada em 2016 pela MGA Entertainment inspirada pela tendência de vídeos de “unboxing” no YouTube, onde crianças e adultos abrem embalagens de brinquedos, ou outros objetos, para mostrar aos espectadores como funcionam ou o que fazem. Sendo um brinquedo colecionável, com a possibilidade de mais de cem bonecas surpresa, a L.O.L. Surprise, que é um sucesso de vendas, explora o brincar pela descoberta das várias camadas envolvidas no “unboxing” da embalagem da boneca. O marketing da L.O.L. Surprise não envolve anúncios de TV e toda a sua estratégia é focada em vídeos no YouTube mostrando crianças abrindo (e/ou descobrindo) o brinquedo. É possível perceber que abrir a embalagem faz parte da experiência/brincadeira da L.O.L. Surprise, e consequentemente descobrir a boneca. Já que o crescimento da boneca norte-americana L.O.L, não só no Brasil mas ao redor do mundo (FROMM, 2019), é um tendência de sucesso crescente nos últimos anos (GREEN, 2018) , a pesquisa tem como objetivo descrever e analisar os aspectos multimodais das camadas da embalagem da boneca, percebendo como o elemento surpresa é construído através delas. Portanto, para a análise das camadas da embalagem nos apoiaremos na Gramática do Design Visual de Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) e suas metafunções visuais, que derivam da linguística sistêmico-funcional de Halliday (1978). A descrição e a análise revelam um estímulo à curiosidade nas crianças, acentuado pelo aspecto interativo percebido através da linguagem verbal e visual, assim como uma tendência em direção ao consumismo e maior engajamento com as redes sociais

Palavras-chave: Brinquedos, multimodalidade, surpresa, embalagem, Gramática do Design Visual.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, toys are related to childhood culture not only as objects of children's desire, but also because "they are produced according to social meanings which vary historically and culturally and, therefore, they convey different messages to children about the social world and the social practices that surround them" (CALDAS-COULTHARD; VAN LEEUWEN, 2003). Considering Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen's concept about the role of toys in childhood, one can look around so as to try to understand in which way toys influence children in current times.

Fleming (1996) pointed out to the fact that it seemed inconceivable that the toy industry was not dependent on a popular culture which shaped and structured the meanings carried by toys. Decades later, the influence of popular culture in the toy industry is still very real, and it can be explored and perceived if one takes a good look at the most successful toys of a certain period.

MGA Entertainment created the L.O.L. Surprise dolls in 2016, inspired by the popular trend of *unboxing* videos, in which children and adults open products and/or packages and show to the viewers how it works or what it does. The secret dolls have been a best seller for the last couple of years in a worldwide meteoric rise (GREEN, 2018). We can see some of the dolls in the following picture (Figure 1) which was posted in L.O.L. Surprise's Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

Figure 1 – L.O.L. Surprise collection



Source: L.O.L. Surprise Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

L.O.L. Surprise dolls come inside a round-shaped package wrapped by several layers of plastic which lead the child through different surprises until they finally find the toy. As they are surprise collectible dolls, children do not know which of the more than 100 different dolls they will find.

L.O.L. Surprise has no TV advertisements, as all the marketing strategy is focused on YouTube videos, in which kids “unbox” the toy. In 2019, with the success of the brand, MGA has released other toys related to L.O.L. Surprise which do not follow the original surprise model. However, since the layered round-shaped model was the original success of the doll, it was the one chosen to be analyzed in this study.

From a multimodal perspective, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 15) affirm that

whether we engage in conversation, produce an advertisement or play a piece of music, we are simultaneously communicating, doing something to, or for, or with, others in the here and now of a social context and representing some aspect of the world ‘out there’, be it in concrete or abstract terms, and we bind these activities together in a coherent text or communicative event.

Understanding that toys are embedded with social meanings which represent a certain period of time and have a huge impact on children, this study describes and analyzes the multimodal features of the layers of one package of the L.O.L. Surprise doll, perceiving how the design of the layers develops the surprise element and its interactive implications to children.

Similar studies in the multimodal field have been developed in *Grupo de Pesquisa em Semiótica Visual e Multimodalidade* (GPSM)¹. The research group has been developing projects such as Toys on Focus ², which was the starting point to many research projects such as one related new toy trends and its research implications, which revealed L.O.L. Surprise as the outstanding toy of 2017. The curiosity and desire to explore even further the reasons and the consequences of such a huge trend related to the doll L.O.L. Surprise was the trigger to the development of the present study.

¹GPSM (Visual Semiotics and Multimodality Research Group) has been active since 2008, coordinated by professor Danielle Almeida at Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB). More information available at <https://gpsmmultimodalidade.weebly.com/>.

² Toys on Focus was a project developed by GPSM in which many toy studies were developed. More information about the project available at <https://toysonfocus.weebly.com/>.

The corpus for this study is a collection of 25 images of the 5 layers of the package of Series 2 Wave 2³ L.O.L. Surprise doll. In order to perceive how the visual and the verbal elements of the layers are involved in developing the surprise element, making the discovery process the main focus of the L.O.L. Surprise doll, the multimodal analysis will resort to Kress and van Leeuwen's *representational*, *interactive* and *compositional* metafunctions⁴ described in their Grammar of Visual Design (2006).

The objectives are (1) to describe and analyze the layers of L.O.L. Surprise's package through the Grammar of Visual Design (2006); (2) to identify how L.O.L. Surprise's multimodal aspects contribute and enrich the surprise element built through the process of discovery; and (3) to reflect upon and report the implications of the attached interactive meanings of L.O.L. Surprise's package with children and consumerism.

This study will be developed in three stages. The next chapter, THE L.O.L. DOLL AND ITS SURPRISE ELEMENT, will detail information about the L.O.L. Surprise doll, contextualizing its creation and current success through a critical reading. The following chapter, THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN, will describe and explain the metafunctions of the Grammar of Visual Design (2006), followed by chapter number 4 – ANALYSIS, in which the layers of the package of L.O.L. Surprise will be analyzed. Later, there will be final considerations with the concluding remarks of the study.

³ The L.O.L. Surprise dolls have different Series, which are different collections, and even inside of a Series, there is the possibility of more than one Wave. A Wave adds dolls which are still not revealed, therefore, if a Series has 2 Waves, it means some dolls were revealed in the first Wave and some in the second, including new dolls in a already existing Series.

⁴ Representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions will be explored and explained in Chapter 3.

2. THE L.O.L. DOLL AND ITS SURPRISE ELEMENT

In 2016, the L.O.L. Surprise doll was created by toy manufacturer MGA Entertainment being categorized as a collectible toy. However, it is important to mention that the doll also has a very strong appeal with its accessories, clothing and styles, which could also classify her into the category of fashion dolls. Therefore, it is a doll which combines features of different “doll categories” and could be associated with collectible or fashion dolls. Some L.O.L. Surprise dolls can be observed in the following picture (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – L.O.L. Surprise dolls



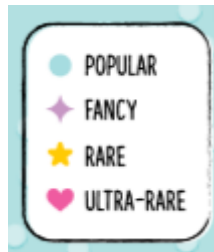
Source: L.O.L. Surprise Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

Its appearance is very diverse, there are dolls with many different shades of skin color, different types of hair, as well as different fashion styles. The focus on fashion styles and colors used can be traditionally connected to a predominant female audience. However, in 2018, MGA Entertainment added the first male doll to the L.O.L. collection, Punk Boi, which can be regarded as an attempt of the company to expand the target audience of consumers.

Another fact about the L.O.L. Surprise dolls is that it is possible to find in their manuals – which come with the dolls- their own doll classification: they can be “popular”, “fancy”, “rare” or “ultra-rare”. The classification is an aspect of great interest to children, since it stimulates their desire to have the “ultra-rare”, which

could be regarded as a consumption design strategy. In order to have the rarest dolls, children will have to consequently buy more dolls in order to find them, stimulating consumerism. The classification of L.O.L. Surprise dolls, as portrayed in their manuals, can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – L.O.L. Classification



Source: Personal file.

As it has been previously said, the dolls can be found inside a round-shaped package wrapped by five layers of plastic. After peeling each of the layers, the child finds different surprises, namely: a secret message (which is a clue to the doll's name), stickers, a bottle, shoes, an outfit, and finally, inside the package, an accessory and the doll, all in miniature sizes. There are more than 100 surprise dolls, among different Series and Waves.

MGA Entertainment created the L.O.L. Surprise doll in adaptation to the new digital era. According to Kline (1993, p. 236), the intentions of toy companies are

simply those of business: to increase the profitability of their firms through the expansion of the market share for toys. But business goals must be translated into marketing strategies.

Therefore, MGA developed a different strategy, the dolls are not advertised through TV commercials, as it was common in the past decades, but through social media, since this strategy has become increasingly more powerful when it comes to contemporary marketing and advertising.

The strategy worked, as the L.O.L Surprise in present days⁵ has its advertising and campaign based on social media, with 1.135.658 subscribers on its YouTube channel, 528.544 and 176,151 followers on its Instagram and Facebook, respectively. The doll not only has YouTube as its main advertising platform, but it was also

⁵ This undergraduate thesis was written in August of 2019. The data about L.O.L. Surprise number of followers and subscribers was collected on August 18th, 2019.

created inspired by the YouTube trend of *unboxing* videos, according to Marsh (2016, p. 375),

these are videos in which commercial goods are unwrapped and they have become very popular, with the most frequently viewed channels attracting billions of views. Those aimed at children focus on the unwrapping of toys or artefacts such as collectible cards and surprise/Kinder eggs.

A screen capture of an unboxing video of L.O.L. Surprise's YouTube channel can be seen below (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Unboxing video



Source: L.O.L. Surprise official YouTube channel.

The *unboxing* trend aligns with Kline's (1993, p. 241) affirmation about advertisements of how "kids liked to watch other kids having fun, and through the psychological process of evaluative transfer they would associate this pleasure with the product". Therefore, by watching other children opening the toys and playing with them, the child experiences an associative pleasure.

However, there seem to be different opinions about the ultimate result of the consumption of *unboxing* videos. In their studies, Marsh (2016), and Craig and Cunningham (2017), explore the different opinions and perspectives about the *unboxing* trend, which could either view it as a marketing strategy to stimulate consumerism, or as new form of entertainment to children. Therefore, there is not an agreement among researchers about whether the *unboxing* trend is ultimately

positive or negative, but it is certain that not only was L.O.L. inspired by the trend but it also continues to inspire it by stimulating children to record their own unboxing videos.

In an interview for Forbes in 2019, L.O.L. Surprise's creator, Isaac Larian (president and CEO of MGA Entertainment), affirmed that the idea of L.O.L. happened after he discovered the concept of *unboxing* videos: "I was shocked. So, the next day I told the team: let's do the ultimate unboxing toy with lots of surprises. After all, who doesn't like surprises? That is how LOL Surprise! was born."

The creation of L.O.L. envisioned the *unboxing* of the doll, and consequently it became a sensation with millions of views on its YouTube videos. The "unboxing" videos of L.O.L. dolls are even more popular because the kids who buy the dolls are encouraged to record their own videos and post them on social media. In some cities in the United States and Canada, there were claw machines and "unboxing booths" of L.O.L. Surprise. In order to try to grab a Glitter Series L.O.L. Surprise doll one L.O.L. Surprise doll should be bought. After having the chance to win a Glitter Series L.O.L. the kids could open their L.O.L. Surprise in the "unboxing booth" to record the *unboxing* process.

Nevertheless, the L.O.L. doll became not only an Internet sensation, but also a best seller in many countries, such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, being considered in 2017, "this year's hot toy" (BHATTARAI, 2017) or "toy of the holiday season" (WHITE, 2017). In 2018, L.O.L. Surprise won the Toy Of The Year (TOTY) Award, alongside Fingerlings by WowWee USA, Inc, establishing it as a successful, and therefore, relevant doll of our contemporary times. One of the elements which could be attributed to the worldwide success of L.O.L. is its "surprise" element, which stimulates children's curiosity.

2.1 Perspectives on the design of L.O.L. Surprise's package

Since the toy's inspiring idea was its "opening", the discovery process plays a huge part in its composition and how the L.O.L doll interacts with children. The discovery is emphasized through the surprise element. According to Ludden, Schifferstein and Hekkert (2008, p. 28)

A surprise reaction to a product can be beneficial to both a designer and a user. The designers benefit from a surprise reaction because it can draw attention to the product, leading to increased product recall and recognition, and increased word-of-mouth. [...] The product user benefits from the surprise because it makes the product more interesting to interact with.

Through its design, it is possible to understand that there is an interaction which is created between the L.O.L. Surprise and the consumer related to the surprise. Taking that in consideration, one could understand that the round-shaped package, and the way it is supposed to be opened, can be related to a “different shaped appeal”, since dolls’ boxes are traditionally rectangle-shaped, contributing to the development of the surprise with an unusual way of opening.

Since the buyer already knows that there is a surprise involved in the process of opening the L.O.L. package, there is an anticipation which requires from designers to influence customers’ expectations before the experience itself (DIXON et al, 2017). Such role is played by the five layers which involve the package, since they will develop this anticipation interacting with the child and creating the whole experience of opening the surprise doll. The following picture (Figure 5) shows L.O.L. Surprise packages ready to be sold.

Figure 5 – L.O.L. Surprise packages



Source: L.O.L. Surprise Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

When observing the design of L.O.L. Surprise’s package and understanding from this perspective the role played by the layers, one could say that the opening (or *unboxing*) of the doll is already part of the play. As Fleming (1996) stated, “toys are

infinitely adaptable and can take on meanings other than those they originally came with, and indeed any object can temporarily become a toy.” (p. 67). Therefore, the layers of the package could “temporarily become a toy” in the child’s process of discovery through the *unboxing* of the doll.

According to Kim and Mattila (2013), “providing an explanation for a surprise event is not only useful to control customers’ expectations but also helpful in enhancing customer delight” (p. 366). It is possible to relate this to the L.O.L. Surprise toy, since the previous information about the seven surprises discovered through the layers will provoke this anticipation which continues to be built until the discovery of the doll.

In order to understand how the layers of the package of L.O.L. Surprise enhances anticipation and builds children’s expectations while unwrapping the toy, we will analyze the layers of the package of one L.O.L. Surprise doll through the Grammar of Visual Design (2006), in terms of its representative, interactive and compositional metafunctions, which will be explored in the next chapter.

3.THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN

In order to analyze visual images, we will draw on Kress & Van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design (2006), a theory that has been developed from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. As the authors claim in their book *Reading Images* (2006), images are not only aesthetic and expressive, but also structured in social, political and communicative dimensions (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006).

The Grammar of Visual Design proposes three metafunctions through which an image can be perceived and, therefore, analyzed: *Representational*, *Interactive* and *Compositional*. The three metafunctions are perspectives which coexist, through which it is possible to analyze different aspects of any visual representation.

3.1 Representational Metafunction

The *Representational* metafunction is portrayed through the participants, processes or objects represented in the semiotic mode and the meanings that are built through this representation, be it through a process of interaction or classification. This metafunction can be divided between *narrative* and *conceptual* representations. *Narrative* representations are characterized by the presence of vectors which connect the participants, the vectors are elements which indicate *action*, *reaction*, *mental* or *verbal processes*.

In *action processes* the participants are regarded as *Actors* "from which the vector emanates, or which forms the vector" (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 63) and the *Goal* (the participant which is the aim of the vector). When the *Goal* is visually explicit, the action is a *transactional process*. When, on the other hand, the *Goal* is not explicit, it is a *non-transactional process*. The *reaction process* happens when the vector is represented by the direction of the eyeline or the direction of a glance. Therefore, in this process, the participant which glances will be called *Reactor* and the object of his glance will be called *Phenomenon*. *Reaction processes* can also be classified as *transactional* or *non-transactional* depending on the presence of the *Phenomenon* in the visual representation.

Mental and *Verbal* processes are characterized by different kind of vectors, thought balloons (in the case of a *mental process*) and dialogue balloons (in the case of a *verbal process*). Participants are called *Sensors* (in the case of a thought balloon, and *Speaker/Sayer* (in the case of a dialogue balloon).

Conceptual representations, on the other hand, do not entail the presence of vectors and can be classified as *classificational*, *analytical* or *symbolic processes*. In *classificational processes* the visual representation presents people, places or objects which have characteristics that make them belong to a certain classified group, establishing a kind of relation between the participants in which some of them play the role of *Subordinate* to at least one *Superordinate*.

When the *Superordinate* cannot be explicitly identified and the *Subordinates* are positioned in a symmetrical composition, the structure is regarded as a *Covert Taxonomy*. In the cases in which the *Superordinate* is explicitly identified (usually placed above or below the *Subordinates*) and the participants are placed in some kind of tree structure, the structure is an *Overt Taxonomy*.

The *analytical process* is the one in which the visual representation will present connections between a part-whole structure. Participants here named as *Carriers* (representing the whole) with a number of *Possessive Attributes* (representing its parts). *Analytical processes* can be of the *unstructured* type (when it shows its *Possessive Attributes* but not how the parts fit together, or the *Carrier* as a whole), or of a *structured* type (when all of the *Carrier* is shown through its *Possessive Attributes*, which can be analyzed in relation to its other subclassifications).

Participants in *symbolic processes* are analyzed through their symbolic representation, that is, for what they “mean” or what they “are”. Generally, among the participants there is always a *Carrier* (“the participant whose meaning or identity is established in the relation” (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 105), and sometimes *Symbolic Attributes* (“the participant represents the meaning or identity itself” (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 105). *Symbolic Attributes* are characterized by their salience and associative symbolic values.

If *Symbolic Attributes* are not represented explicitly in the visual representation, the image is said to be a *Symbolic Suggestive process*, in which one can infer that the meaning and identity comes from the *Carrier* itself. However, if *Symbolic Attributes* are represented explicitly, one can understand that the meaning

and identity are conferred to the *Carrier* through its *Attributes*, as a *Symbolic Attributive process*. The following figure exemplifies *narrative* and *conceptual* representations (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Narrative and Conceptual Representations



Narrative representation/ Verbal process



Conceptual representation/ Classificational process

Images' source: L.O.L. Surprise Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

3.2 Interactive Metafunction

The *Interactive* metafunction is perceived through the interactions between the represented participants and the viewer (interactive participant), which can be perceived through positioning, angles, shot distance and modality. This metafunction analyzes the following dimensions: *contact*, *social distance*, *attitude* and *modality*.

Contact is established between the participants and the viewer through a vector coming from the participants' eyeline/gaze. A *contact* can be of a *demand* type – when there is established connection between the participant and the viewer, meaning that the participant demands something from the viewer – or of *offer* type – when the participant is presented as an object to be observed/contemplated without establishing a connection with the viewer.

The *social distance* is analyzed through the distance in which the participants are visually represented. In a *close shot*, head and shoulders of the participant are represented establishing an intimate relation with the viewer. In a *medium shot* the participant is represented from head to knees, thus establishing a personal relation

with the viewer). Finally, in a *long shot* the participant is represented in full figure, therefore, establishing a public and impersonal relation with the viewer.

Attitude is related to the angle through which the represented participants are positioned, determining the perspective through which they are seen by the viewer. *Attitude* can be determined by *frontal*, *oblique* or *vertical angles*. A *frontal angle* happens when the represented participant stands as if “facing” the viewer, thus establishing a sense of involvement with him/her, while the *oblique angle* happens when the participant seems to “look away” or turns to another direction from the viewer, establishing a sense of detachment from him/her (ALMEIDA, 2006).

A *vertical angle* determines power connected with the *high*, *low* or *eye level* angle. When the represented participant is seen from a *high level* it means that the interactive participant (viewer) has power over the represented participant. When the represented participant is seen from a *low level* it means that it has power over the interactive participant. However, if the represented participant is seen at *eye level*, then there is no power difference between the represented and interactive participants.

Modality can be analyzed through different perspectives: through the degree of relation between the visually represented elements and what can be seen through the naked eye, or through their relation in terms of what things really are (going beyond the visual). The elements taken in consideration while analyzing modality are *color*, *contextualization*, *representation*, *depth*, *illumination* and *brightness*. Examples of interactive representations can be found bellow (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Interactive representations



Contact: demand



Social distance: Long shot



Attitude: Vertical angle

Images' source: L.O.L. Surprise Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

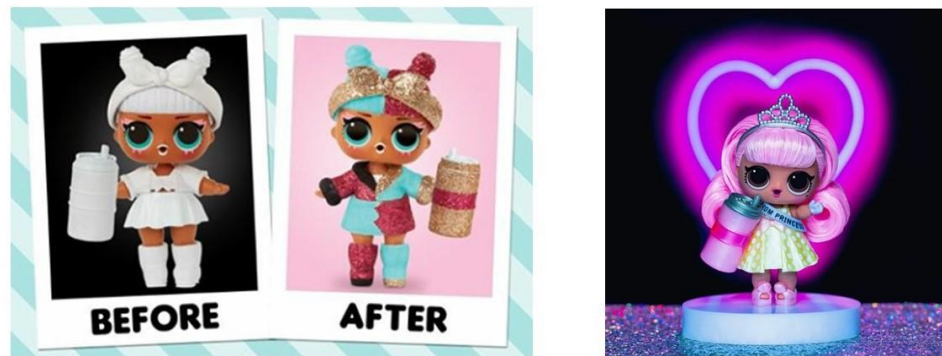
3.3 Compositional Metafunction

The last metafunction, the *compositional* one, is defined by the positioning of the visual elements, the way in which the *representational* and *interactive* elements are thus integrated creating meaning (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). The *compositional* metafunction can be analyzed through *information value*, *salience* and *framing*.

Information value is related to the placement of the elements in the different “zones” of the image, *left and right*, *top and bottom*, *centre and margin*, and how the different positions convey different meanings to the elements. For instance, information which is already given – the viewer is already supposed to know – is placed on the *left side*, while new information is placed on the *right side*. At the same time, information which is taken as “ideal” – promises or glamourized representations – are placed at the *top* part of the visual representation, while what is taken as “real” – factual or informative representations – is placed at the *bottom*. Following the same dual pattern, the element which is considered the most important is placed in the *centre*, while elements which are secondary or non-important are placed at the *margin*.

Salience creates a hierarchy of importance among the elements by the use of contrasts of *color*, *size*, *background* or *foreground placement*, in order to attract the viewer’s attention to these hierarchic positions. *Framing* is analyzed through the presence or absence of frames or lines which can connect or disconnect elements in the image, making the visual representation strongly or weakly framed, creating a sense of a more connected or disconnected unit of information (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). The following images (Figure 8) show examples of compositional representations.

Figure 8 – Compositional representations



Information value: left and right

Salience: color/placement

Images' source: L.O.L. Surprise Instagram account (@lolsurprise).

Having explained the systems of signification of the Grammar of Visual Design's representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions we assume that the theory is adequate to analyze the proposed object of research. Therefore, in the next chapter the layers of L.O.L Surprise's package will be analyzed in order to perceive how this anticipating experience is built enhancing the surprise element through its multimodal features.

4. ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, the L.O.L. Surprise doll comes inside a round shaped package wrapped by five layers of plastic, each revealing a different surprise each. Through the process of discovery of the doll, the peeling of different layers plays a role in contributing with curiosity in the revealing process. We will analyze each one of the five layers of one package of such doll according to the representational, compositional and interactive metafunctions in order to perceive how they contribute to the surprise element.

The package analyzed is from L.O.L. Surprise Series 2 Wave 2, donated to our research group (GPSM) by a child who had already opened the package. The Series 2 is the last Series that follows the original format of discovery (one surprise by layer), therefore being the last (more recent) Wave of L.O.L. Surprise which is “unwrapped” in the original format/discovery process.

In this chapter the layers analyzed are exposed through pictures taken by the author. The first layer of the package is the first thing that the child or adult – since sometimes parents will be the ones buying it – sees when buying the doll. Since the doll does not come in a box, the first layer works as a “box” by containing all the information about the product, as it is possible to see in the following images.

Figure 9 – First layer



Source: Personal file.

The first layer (Figure 9) brings information about the 7 surprises which come inside the package: the doll's logo, information about which series it belongs to, code bar, security warning, symbols that indicate their presence on social media (Instagram and YouTube) and a representation of a L.O.L. Surprise doll through the image of the *Miss Punk* doll. The represented doll carries a verbal process through a speech balloon where it is written "35+ to collect". The fact that the image portrays the doll itself saying it, confirms that the first layer works as a "box" to this product, as it exposes the product information.

In compositional terms one aspect that calls our attention is the salience given to the doll's eyes. L.O.L. Surprise does not seem to replicate the proportions of a human, and the eyes are very big when compared to other elements of the doll's face, such as nose or mouth. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) comment on differences related to eye size in dolls traditionally related to boys or girls. They state that "the eyes of 'girls' dolls [...] tend to be large and highly detailed. While boys are steered towards a more manipulative relation to their dolls, for the girls the look, the interactive dimension, is made to matter more." (p. 251). Even though L.O.L. Surprise does not explicitly categorize their dolls as aimed to a specific female audience, it is worth mentioning that the comment made on large eyes in dolls reveals that the doll appeals to the interactive dimension, which will continue to be explored in the analysis.

In relation to its interactive meanings, one can perceive that there is an interaction established with the viewer, that at this point could be a child or an adult, "talking" to her/him and also by establishing a *contact of demand* as the doll looks directly to the viewer. As well as by the positioning of the doll in a *medium shot*, adding proximity to the viewer, though not completely intimate and known, because it is still a surprise doll. The *frontal angle* in which the doll is depicted also contributes to the establishment of a relationship of familiarity with the viewer by the its characteristic of involvement, which continues to be reinforced through the peeling of the subsequent layers.

Such an interactive aspect of the package also gets reinforced through the kinetic aspect of the *unboxing* process. According to Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen (2003), "the kinetic design of larger dolls such as teddy bears is not so

much oriented towards allowing the children to make the dolls do things, as towards allowing the children to directly interact with the dolls, so that the dolls become the objects of the child's actions" (p. 3). Therefore, the opening process, through the peeling of the layers, makes L.O.L. Surprise an "object of the child's actions", adding interactive value to the toy.

Through the *compositional* metafunction one can perceive the doll as the most salient element of the layer. Because of its round shape one cannot be assertive about which element is the centre of layer, however, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) affirm that "regardless of where they are placed, salience can create a hierarchy of importance among the elements, selecting some as more important, more worthy of attention than other" (p. 201).

Even though the doll is not the central element of the layer, she can be considered the most important element through salience. She is emphasized through *size*, and hair *color* which contrasts with the green background. At the same time, the dolls and the logo emphasize the main object of desire to children, which is the L.O.L. Surprise doll.

After peeling the first layer, the child⁶ finds a secret message which should help him/her guess which doll is inside. The next layer (Figure 10) contains some information about the product. This layer has a different kind of representation when compared to the previous and the subsequent ones, as it is possible to see in the following images.

Figure 10 – Second layer



Source: Personal file.

⁶ From now on the participant referred to as "the viewer", according to the Grammar of Visual Design (2006), will be referred to as "the child". Until this point the viewer could be a child or adult observing the closed package, but since children are the target audience of the toy, we assume that the subsequent layers will be observed by the child who peels the layers opening it.

The green background is filled with question marks and images of heads of some of the L.O.L. Surprise dolls. It is possible to perceive a *conceptual representation* of the dolls through *symbolic process*. One could interpret the question marks as *symbolic attributes* which enhance the “surprise element” as the most important characteristic of L.O.L Surprise, stimulating the child’s curiosity to find which doll they will find inside the package. The doll heads could be read as the *carriers* of the mystery related to the surprise doll, representing the many possibilities of dolls which can be found inside the package. The *symbolic process* encapsulates the mystery which makes the child wonder about which doll they could find inside the package, stimulating curiosity.

The third layer (Figure 11) has a change in its background color, now a pastel pink background with many different baby bottles and the depiction of the L.O.L. Surprise doll, *Court Champ*.

Figure 11 – Third layer



Source: Personal file.

In *interactive* terms, this layer is represented with doll *Court Champ* in a *medium shot*, establishing an interaction with the child through a *frontal angle*, by looking directly at her/him via a demand gaze. The doll is the main element of the layer, therefore she becomes the main focus of the image not only through her

conspicuous *size* and positioning, but also through the contrast of her brown skin and hair color with the pastel pink colored background. The positioning is very similar to the doll represented in the first layer, although at this point there is a change in the *verbal process*. While in the first layer, *Miss Punk* talks to the buyer about the other 35 possibilities of dolls to collect, *Court Champ* establishes a stronger interaction with the child by asking a question, “WANNA PLAY?”.

While in the first layer the *verbal process* gives extra information about the product, this one directly interacts with the child who is already “unwrapping” the doll. It is possible to perceive the informal use of the language and the establishment of interaction since it is targeted at children, as if it were the doll herself who were asking the child a question. By asking, “WANNA PLAY?” the doll reinforces her “desire to play” with the child, while curiosity continues to be stimulated through the unveiling of L.O.L. Surprise’s layers.

Figure 12 – Fourth layer



Source: Personal file.

In interactive terms, the fourth layer (Figure 12) depicts not only one but two dolls establishing contact with the child through the same kind of visual representation as the previous one. The dolls are placed in a *medium shot*, establishing a *demanding* interaction through the gaze and *frontal angle*, by looking

directly at the child. They are positioned in different angles, so one of them looks upside down, depending on how the round shaped package is positioned. In the pictures used for this article, *Troublemaker* is the one represented upside down in relation to *Curious Q.T.*

The pastel pink background has many different pairs of shoes represented, since it will be the next accessory to be revealed, and there are two different *verbal processes* happening. The first *verbal process* analyzed is the one happening through the L.O.L. doll *Curious Q.T.*'s question to the child, "R U CURIOUS?". We already know that the use of questions points to a stronger connection established with the child, therefore developing interaction and clearly inducing the child's curiosity and excitement for the doll.

As the child goes on unwrapping the layers it is also possible to perceive the continuous use of the informal language. The use of an informal register tends to follow the trends of Internet language such as "R U" instead of "Are you". The second *verbal process* establishes a connection with the doll who is "speaking". One can perceive that the speech balloon has the shape of a cat, which can be connected to the "cat-themed" doll who is speaking, *Troublemaker*, since her features and accessories resemble a cat. Following the "cat theme" the speech balloon presents the words "CLAW IT OPEN!", which continues to stimulate the child to move forward and continue to look for the surprises.

Figure 13 – Fifth layer



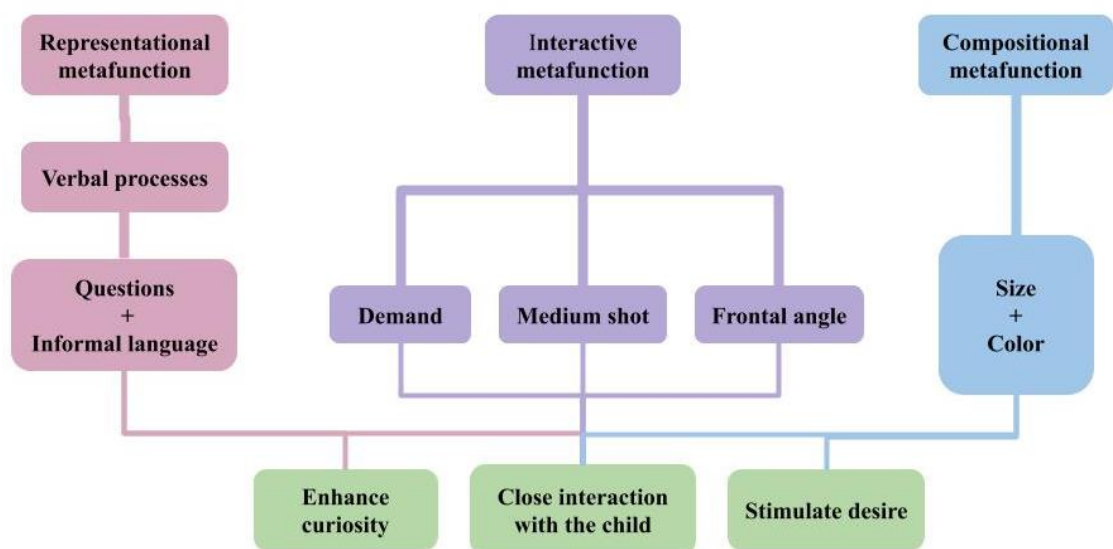
Source: Personal file.

As it is possible to see in the previous images (Figure 13), the fifth and last layer is smaller than the others. Through its pastel blue background, it is possible to see different outfits, which is the next of the seven surprises to be revealed, followed by the last accessory and the doll. *Cherry* is the L.O.L. Surprise doll represented in the package layer, and she follows the same *interactive* perspective previously represented by the other dolls (*demand, medium shot, frontal angle*).

However, being the last layer before finding the doll, the *verbal process* does not bring questions or instructions, but that seems to represent what the doll inside of the package would say to the child, “COMIN’ ATCHA!”, which means “Coming at you!”. Again, the doll establishes an interaction with the child, through the same informal register, warning the child that they are close, and that it is “coming” in his/her direction, which means her/him is close to finding the doll.

It is possible to perceive a pattern of background pastel colors through all the layers, which contrasts with the colors of the doll’s hair, skin or clothes, which are most of the time more vibrant and saturated. It could be argued that the representation of the dolls tends to follow a more adventurous and exuberant fashion, which contributes to adding a positive value to the toy. In the following flowchart are the main findings of the analysis of the layers of L.O.L. Surprise’s package.

Figure 14 – Flowchart



Source: Personal file.

From the analysis of the layers of the L.O.L. Surprise package, it has been possible to perceive that the package attracts the child's attention through its attached interactive meanings and the exploration of the interaction between the doll and the child through its *verbal processes*. Curiosity is also stimulated during the whole process of discovery of the round-shaped package, through the *unboxing* itself.

Despite knowing that there is a surprise doll inside the package, each layer continues to stimulate the desire through the positioning of the doll, which establishes an interactive relationship with the child and the colorful and salient composition of each one of the layers. The process of peeling the layers is a journey of anticipation which children go through in order to reach the climax with the discovery of the doll.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the analysis heretofore presented, it has been possible to observe the fulfillment of the objective (1) to describe and analyze the layers of L.O.L. Surprise's package through the Grammar of Visual Design (2006). Revealing through the *representational* metafunction the verbal processes via informal questions, through the *interactive* metafunction, contact of demand, medium shot and frontal angle, and through the *compositional* metafunction, the salience through size and color.

Such description helped (2) to identify how L.O.L. Surprise's multimodal aspects contribute and enrich the surprise element built through the process of discovery, by revealing how the anticipation of the surprise element is built through the representational, interactive and compositional elements of the layers. A sense of familiarity and interaction with the child is fostered through verbal processes conveyed by the use of informal language and the enhancement of curiosity by means of questions, as well as the positioning of the doll stimulating interaction and desire, all of which while the child unwraps and discovers the surprises before reaching the doll itself.

Understanding that there is a surprise peak when the child finally finds the doll, although it fades away as soon as it is over, it is possible (3) to reflect upon and report the implications of the attached interactive meanings of L.O.L. Surprise's package with children and consumerism. Therefore, one could say that the main element of L.O.L. is the surprise, and that its discovery process is the most important moment of acquiring the toy. After the doll is discovered, the surprise is over, and since the surprise is what attracts children to this toy, because these dolls are collectible, it is possible to say that they stimulate consumerism.

Pinto (2016) argues that when play becomes about buying and accumulating, it reinforces lessons about accumulating things just for the sake of it, not for the beauty of things not mass-produced. Therefore, L.O.L. Surprise opens space for a very necessary discussion about the influence of accumulating, collectible toys and consumerism in children.

The success of L.O.L. Surprise is not limited to the surprise element related to consumerism. It is important to acknowledge the always growing influence of social media, since the doll is extremely popular for its "unboxing" videos. It is still unknown

whether these videos will be a quick trend or if they will establish a new form of entertainment, but they definitely create a huge amount of content to be explored and researched. The surprise has an appeal that goes beyond the actual toy, which gets expanded through the digital world. Therefore, it would not be surprising to predict the continuity of this tendency of engagement between toys and social media throughout times.

According to Macaulay (1991), “seeing necessitates looking and thinking” (p.411), therefore the lack of curiosity would be the first step towards visual illiteracy which would lead us to not really seeing what is going on around us. Threatening us to turn into “isolated, insensitive, incapable, and ultimately helpless victims of a world of increasing complexity and decreasing humanity” (p.411). Researching about toys contributes to understanding a little better the ideas and contexts surrounding the contemporary childhood, which makes us more aware and sparks new reflections about our contemporary society.

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